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from A Book of Poems on Beauty

Anne Lesley Selcer

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Abbas Akhavan's practice ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video and performance. The domestic sphere, as a forked space between hospitality and hostility, has been an ongoing area of research in Akhavan's work. More recent works have shifted focus, wandering onto spaces just outside the home —the garden, the backyard, and other domesticated landscapes.

from *A Book of Poems on Beauty* is set in Minion Pro.

Cover and book design by M. Mack.

at the hunting lodge at Amaliensburg

The windows projected the outdoor scene onto indoor mirrors, thus multiplying both settings. The mirrors were decorated with silver embossed leaves. When the king arrived, the windows were opened and the sun tinted them into a golden glitter. This symbolized the king's alchemical ability to turn silver into gold.

–Dan Graham

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[Illegible handwritten text, heavily scribbled out with black ink]

I

The aesthetic is additive.
Although it flattens, it is
an enunciation born of imitation,
its fact affirms its original object.
It is an act of love;
like love, it's stupid.

In a system of ons and offs.
In the silent language of lighthouses.
In an inconsequential, feminine swarm.

An unaccountable beauty,
fecund but not sacred,
walks alone along a street in New York City,
past a pile of commodity, Italianate, reproductive, rotting,
past a gallery of caryatids,
past girls manipulating the nobs of a cathartic art,
past canephora bearing transactions in their baskets,
past a vanishing metaphysical realm,
the bird, the vase, the book, unable now to justify
or account for the weight of their own beauty,
past machines blowing bubbles in a room walled in mirrors,
past day ladies speaking of their travels,
the light kindly buoying the undersides of their public play,
past a chamber of chaste girls encased in silver,
and looking through mirrors of crysolite, carbuncle, sapphire, and emerald,
past a million images of the self, venerated, fed back to the self,
past the notion of photographic absence, then the real disappeared,
past Walt Whitman's pile of limbs,
past buildings falling, caryatids with broken necks,
past a mass of metal, a tract of land, a number of slaves,
a pile of stones, a human body of certain lineaments,
past a solid wall of caryatids, an army—
“Oh the young girl, that receptacle of shameful secrets
sealed in her own beauty!”

My mother was a secret house,
a new round of enclosures.
Adriatic, Galia, Algerian, Atago.

Magic seemed a refusal of work.
Bella Heart, Betty Anne, Bergamot, Black,
Black Amber, Black Beauty, Black Globe, Black Pearl.

The world had to be disenchanted,
Angel, Aprium, Arkansas Black,
Athena, Baldwin, Apricot,

sexual activity transformed into work,
Black Current, Black Rochelle, Baby Bear,
Catalina, Cherimoya, Crimson Red,
Crab Apple, Clementina, Crimson Glow,

complicity and repulsion, negation then exorcism,
medicine reformulated into perfume.
Red Delicious, Dancy, D'Anjou Red,
Ellendale, Crimson, Crimson Sweet.

In this large and most beautiful house,
Elephant Heart, Barhi, Black Raspberry,
Black Sugarcane, Canaydria, Canary.

Bartlett, Babcock, Blackberry,
Calimyrna, Cello Blood.

Ariran, Athena, Amagaki,
my mother was a feral house.
Ambrosia, Apple Pear.

Froning and intricate, ruined with color,
if property creates meaning,
a landlord is a baroque and overgenerative thing.
Pigment stacked into tall rows,
permanence and significance,
terrestrial plentitude and distribution,
color slung into rings.
Ownership is abstraction's embrace.
And this dynamic female form,
pink washed at the bottom,
green escaping its line:
the terms of the social are the limits of the social,
is it beauty before it's privatized?
The world of abstraction is a world of surfaces,
they are its only sociality.
As for correspondences,
"The administration said send two,
which we refused.
I said we should all go."

Thatched, shingled, sloped, fixed, patched.
Dirt, concrete, hardwood, lino, washed, scrubbed.
North, South, East, West, cluttered, bare, papered, painted, knocked out, put up.

A-frame, flat.
Moss-covered, bricked, tiled, painted, creaking, buckled, floating or suspended.
Skeined, silk, paper, disappearing.

Skylights, parties, gardens, landing strips.
Someone else's ceiling, false foundation.
I cannot believe you lied.

Creped skin, pipe smoke, citadel.
Trampled leaves, black dirt, winding path.
I dress this way because I want to.

Sloped, snowcapped.
When it comes down to it, we're talking about money.
Culture is my skin.

At one time I loved him but I believe in him no more.
Checkerboard, parquet, laminate.
Changeable, of questionable consequence.

Philosophy is paramount.
You've taken so much shit.
Insulated, riddled with holes, temporary.

When I was the beautiful girl
the fireflies signified:

I was trapped in amber.
In a sudden Midwest rain.

I sat on the curb with kids.
Eye shining, in rips and scuffs.

I held fast like an Indian
in a box of dead differences.

Stunned still.
A moth in a jar.
The ethics of the I, ignored.

When I was a beautiful girl,
in a system of ons and offs,
in the silent language of lighthouses,
in an inconsequential, feminine swarm,
the fireflies signified:

One unrolling bolt of ice cream silk...grape-sized globes of lapis lazuli and goldvein grouped and reposing in the corners...a fountain or a chandelier...a set of gold combs scalloped in black pearl...a stretched suede book that knocks as soft as a little girl...hautly arched whalebone stilettos...fat, well-behaved chairs...paintings on every inch of ceiling...tiny crystal pots containing notions of mashed lime, birdbath water, temporin and pearl...a leather up of heron quills...two rocaille tiaras...a Zouave jacket woven from crushed leaves and gold...the extended family of an orchid...a bracelet made of tombstone...a wig culled from Reykvíkingur towheads...a lunar astrolabe...a millefiori flower bed...a set of handwritten encyclopedias...a comprehensive book of cloud typology...a slice of wedding cake crystallized into chalcedony...a Cherry Plum, Clematis, and Honeysuckle cure...a fine and tiny typewriter...porcelain nails in a bell china box...flowers floating in a cabinet vivarium...a perfume of Fiji nectars...a box of San Franciscos...

cutouts, opulence, piling, pooling at the bottom
heaven is a negative place
a holographic poem, a list
strung on fishing line, of irregularly cut shapes
when you say pleasure, it refers back to the subject/
beauty is private, the origin of beauty is private
an open umbrella rising up through sound
when you say sensation, it refers back to the object
a picture has no skin

Illumination exhales light, then shadow inhales it.

A picture of a populous, projected back onto the populous.

Kim Phuc says, “Too hot.” Her body reverberates as a monument.

If you can see a man in his voice, what sound does that make?

A short essay on form

A form amassing. A signal sent and received. An object for use. Form is force. Form behind. Form in a world of radical positivity. Form is leaking. Form learned from limits. Force is form. In this way, form is passive. Form is seen. Light reflects from the surface of form. Form which reforms then dissipates. Form which strikes then flees. Form which curls into being, then uncurls. Now that form is money and language is untied. Signals sounded. Signals rhyme, chime, echo. Form is limit. Form has a memory which is linguistic. Then written, form conflates with truth. Each law contains elided labor. Which is the bright light of shipwreck signaling other lights. Which is why it is ok to say “I don’t hate form but form’s marketplace.” Which is why it is ok to say, “I hate form” but not be interested in Organic Form.

The eye must be sunlight

Ice caked, falling water, compression, clarity.
If colors are the deeds and sins of light, this is light caught sleeping.

Green abases to gold, red deepens to rouge,
a hillside becomes painterly, its grass turns ochre, expires into solidity.

A postcard series: the sky painted blue, the grass green,
the work is a machinery of distance and contact.

Conceptually based sequences, shot North, West, Northwest, Southeast.

Cold and colorful, red deepens to rouge, gold abases to green.
The mirror is the brightest color: the mirror strikes light.

Sasha Gray

Meaning is sex.
There is no other.

I was born in Sacramento, CA. I never allowed myself to become a negative product of that environment.

I began college in 2005, balancing school and work seven days a week. Around this time I began thinking about pornography as a career opportunity.

I was not sexually abused. I am not on drugs. The acts I perform are always consensual.

I am a woman who strongly believes in what she does.

I hope to inspire people from all walks of life.
And to collaborate with innovative individuals (bohemians welcome).

It is a disenfranchised, lower-to-middle class neighborhood.

This is not what I preach or believe.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (at 16 frames per second) The sunlight slipped over the polished leaves. In the grass, white daisies were tremulous. The spray of lilac fell from his hand upon the gravel. A furry bee came and buzzed round it for a moment. In the slanting beams that streamed through the open doorway the dust danced and was golden. The heavy scent of roses seemed to brood over everything. Some large blue china jars and parrot tulips were ranged on the mantelshelf, and through the small leaded panes of the window streamed the apricot-coloured light of a summer day in London. The sunset had smitten into scarlet gold the upper windows of the houses opposite. The panes glowed like plates of heated metal. The sky above was like a faded rose. The tulip beds across the road flamed like throbbing rings of fire. A white dust, tremulous cloud of orris-root it seemed, hung in the panting air. The brightly-coloured parasols danced like monstrous butterflies. The darkness lifted, and, flushed with faint fires, the sky hollowed itself into a perfect pearl. Huge carts filled with nodding lilies rumbled slowly down the polished empty street. The sky was pure opal now, and the roofs of the houses glistened like silver against it. From some chimney opposite a thin wreath of smoke was rising. It curled, a violet riband, through the nacre-coloured air.

Meanwhile, in beauty's cold pink and silver rooms, where gold necklaces of meaning slip through female fingers:

solid mounds and maritime orchard time of
slaves, noose hands that woman had, noose
hands she had. Puffed full blown and well
disposed to fine cocktail clutterings, books
of rose, maritime rose, her bible pinks heavy,
black as that, her pinks were black as that.
Janus-faced, jackal-souled, a slivering of
knifeshade straight down the gills, and apple
hands and thrilled and trilled.

Soliloquy

They are a fervor, a slouch, they come to visit to pass the afternoon. They are waiting for someone else, waiting for something else, the women are waiting like a dandelion gone to seed. It never comes to a point, a terrible July.

A mother goes into the store, a mother carries bags with nothing in them but the materials from which to make a very first day on her sewing machine. She fixes dinner in a house in California. She does laundry in the bathtub, composes prosody through chores.

She wants to be exchangeable but she is not exchangeable. Her prosody replaces her, a terrible July. Now the long yawn of diurnality, in skirts and standards, repeatable in little towns with yellow suns and lapis skies, on the under market of the commonplace, brave as day and claiming form, which is radical, brave as a pitcher, a vase.

What proliferates in absence, distance
and is behind every word,
what sounded like lions

but were rips, splices,
the invisible straining toward convexity,

how heaven and death are concurrent
and beauty is a way to appear.

The natural world, frozen, too present in meanings whilst I walk in and among the shops. My tree, my pinnacle, my cloudlike. When winning took the form of femininity described to me from four angles and roaring forward with many lowpaid attendants. The bad facts or untrustworthy ones, the habit of luminous noise: Oh brightening field, oh city street, oh capital and forgetful cloak, oh row of screens, a fire on each. The promise of the city to a person like me; gone turning on the wheel, familiar as family. Was fear *outside* the house, actually lurking there? I counted the ways in which I could become interior. I understood hair as raw material, formed a habit of hiding in representation's fold. Now here is an object, now air must flow around it, seen because it gathers light, a cloak of mirror, this is the information by which the civis knows me. Come to California and underneath the paving stones. Veruschka again, elided in truth's wall, her sadness is a quick and aesthetic, disappearing thing, mine goes in the place of public space.

**Before we were filled with content, we sought to be filled
with sensation**

beauty is a particular unit of duration
the day is a palace, each hour a room
is a form of sadness

is a deferral of the movement of time

evening dawning on the housetops
the sky an impossible screen

is circular, complete
decorated with silver embossed leaves

is an object
an hour of the eyes

moves out of a warm, general indisputability
into a contraction which is form

exists as a cold, hard public specificity,
a positive presence in a market of exchange

is posterior to perception
silver to gold

is the inferior or the primary currency
the king has this alchemical ability

there are one hundred ways to ornament a note.

II

Riddem

All the beautiful boys
Have secrets that tie their mouths,
Educations that wind like staircases,
Dressed in pinions, bright as children
In the prison of the collapsed present,

Their speech goes from the mouth as a ribbon,
Stretches out like poverty stretches out in languor,
Records and retells sensory fact that models untellingness,
In collaged rhythmic sequences that
Unfold like the poem, but effect change.

In the glittering building, in the self's apartment,
Blossoming in the bright actual library of tears,
They chant: "In the place of absence,
Multiplicity, in the place of givenness,
Repleteness, in the place of languor, rising,
In the place of rhythm, ribbon."

They laugh outside the library,
Read out loud to one another on the pavement.
Actual tears drench the ground. Vast lucid texts
Are unclenched, "It is morning, speech has blossomed,
You are awakening. A lovely light is singing out loud.
In the movement, in my eyes, in the line, Silvia
Federici is alive."

If the object cannot be moral

She makes a series of bookworks and displays them on a single bookshelf at eye height. One book is one minute, one book is three minutes, one book is one hour, one book is a day, one book is a month, and one book is a year. As long as law is not extractable from language, time is all she will document. Once written, these books may sit fat, absolved, not read at all.

Fe-

She takes a series of full body percepts, she files them in a shoebox, she gets them made into slides and projects them onto city surfaces. They are accosting and replacing the normal flow, creating an inward space externally and thus reproducing thousands of like inward spaces aligned conceptually with femininity, and thus fecundity.

**Hundreds of glass bottles are emptied from a garbage can into
a scavenging truck**

The cacophony will be recorded, then uploaded.
A Latin choir will study the resulting waveform
and learn to imitate it with their mouths. Their
performance will be decorous—a public plaza,
a civic center, a central market—but completely
silent. The original recording will be destroyed,
the scavenger is illegal.

The book of this

The book of this is dark and compact.

It has an ornate cover which is thick, embossed, or encrusted.

The book of this has yellowed pages with writing so small
it is nearly illegible.

The book of this repels its reader.

It is physically hard to open, like a weapon.

The book of this book is so very private.

This book looks like reversal.

This book has a beauty that's ruined when it's read.

This book coordinates the condition of being out of relation.

Notes on Media and Money

Me and Rex (landlord) across the table in the toxic kitchen
when I thought I would be out on the street with my daughter,

Him laughing, we are here now, not alone,
this is how you are not alone.

Finally this sense between us,
perfectly communicable, entirely illuminated.

This house prevents singularity, he said.
Once you become media, you are never alone.

Me and Rex across the table
when I thought I would be out on the street
him laughing at me, here we are together, not alone,
this is how you get to be not alone.

A structure for the singular body, I thought,
a crib, a coffin, a visible interval in appearances,

Here, on the table, a sense between us,
and no way out of making it.

In Reversal of Appearing

The plaza is filled with screens, the plaza is filled with pictures. What goes in the absence of a plaza. Sunshine then shadows.

Then ten people, a hundred people, a thousand people, a hundred thousand people fill the plaza. Then ten people, a hundred people, a thousand people, a hundred thousand people hold up a representation. Then ten people, a hundred people, a thousand people, a hundred thousand people stream from the plaza, an agora emptying toward the sun.

In the city in which each communication is already artifact / in the city in which each house luckier / breathing numbers / in the city in which the city does not exist.

Now the plaza is empty, mute with sun. Then instead of a crowd of 100,000 people, you have 100 crowds of 1,000 people. Then instead of 100 crowds of 1,000 people, you have 10,000 crowds of 10 people.

Here, ten people, a hundred people, a thousand people, a hundred thousand people on screen, become window, renamed for absence. Here, a mother holds up a child turned placard, turned window, turned screen, become sign: a renamed plaza.

At the plaza, a line of men advances. At the plaza, elders sell cooking oil and boxes of cereal. At the plaza, the agora is rendered visible in the sensors of the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center. Sensing reversed, the senses redacted, the redacted rhythm of a plaza.

In which / the plaza was always a representation / turned to look / in the city in which / each house luckier, breathing numbers / in the city in which / a hundred thousand messages amass and riot / in the city in which / a shadow recomposes identically over every redistribution of forms / in the city in which / the city does not exist / turned to look and my city was gone / at the plaza / the noise of its absence.

Portions of this work have appeared in *Action, Yes!* and in chapbooks for the Dusie Kollektiv (2011) and supersuperette press (2014)—all titled from *A Book of Poems on Beauty*.

The front piece appeared in *Not Sent Letters* in 2009.

“An unaccountable beauty” and “Fronding and intricate” are forthcoming in *Fence* in 2014.

“My mother was a secret house,” “The natural world frozen,” and “In Reversal of Appearing” appeared in the anthology *It’s night in San Francisco but it’s sunny in Oakland* (Timeless Infinite Light, 2014).

“One unrolling bolt” was commissioned by artist Sydney Hermant for inclusion in her artist book *Aunt Maude’s Scrap Book*, published by JRP-Ringier in 2006.

“Illumination exhales light,” “The book of this,” and “If the object cannot be moral” appeared in *Dusie* in 2013.

“A short essay on form” appeared on SFMoma’s Open Space blog in 2013.

“Before we were filled with content” appeared in *Try Magazine*, 2010.

“The eye must be sunlight,” “My mother was a secret house,” “What proliferates in absence, distance,” and “Riddem” appeared in *Where Eagles Dare*, Summer 2014.

“In Reversal of Appearing” was originally commissioned by SFMoma in conjunction with the 2013 SECA awards and published on the Open Space blog.

All the sentences in “The Picture of Dorian Gray (at 16 frames per second)” are taken from Oscar Wilde’s novel.

All the sentences in “Sasha Gray” are taken from Sasha Gray’s Myspace page.

Other language sources include Stephen Shore’s 2012 lecture at SFMoma, Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just*, Tiqqun’s *Raw Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* and *Sonogram of a Potential*, Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, an interview with Ariana Reines, Juhani Pallasmaa’s *Eyes of the Skin*, Dan Graham’s 2012 lecture at SFAI, Denise Levertov’s *Some Notes on Organic Form*, George Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous,” Ted Berrigan’s “Sonnet XXXVII,” Paul Celan’s “Approachable,” and an interview with the Northern California Chief of Riot Control on NPR, 2013.

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from *A Book of Poems on Beauty* is dedicated to Ariadne Wells.

Anne Lesley Selcer is a poet and art writer, most recently serving as a columnist for SFMOMA's Open Space. She has one book, *Banlieusard*, commissioned by Artspeak gallery, and chapbooks from supersuperette and the Dusie Kollektiv. Her writing has been anthologized in *NW Edge III: the end of reality*, *The Physics of Context*, *The Feeling is Mutual: A list of our fucking demands*, and most recently in *It's night in San Francisco, but it's sunny in Oakland*. Her poems have appeared in *The Clackamus Review*, *Dusie*, *Where Eagles Dare*, in the artist book *Aunt Maude's Scrap Book* by Sydney Hermant, and are forthcoming in *Fence*. Her writing on art has been commissioned by galleries Centre A, the Or, and the Helen Pitt, by artists Aurel Schmidt and Abbas Ackhavan, and has appeared in *Fillip* and *Doppelganger* magazines. In San Francisco, she was a member of the now defunct Nonsite Collective. In Vancouver, she created and curated an interdisciplinary series for poets, researchers, and artists called the Chroma Reading Series.

from *A Book of Poems on Beauty* is an ongoing, research-based project that has produced poems, essays, and video.

I want to be light like a blackbird
but I am heavy like air.

I come to it
with everything that is not form
and begin to think of beauty
as art's vestige
up there in the poem,
a city loosened,
a city stilled.



from *A Book of Poems on Beauty* by Anne Lesley Selcer challenges the notion that beauty and the feminine have no place in postmodern art as much as it reinvents these notions for contemporary readers. It tells us that "beauty is a particular unit of duration / ... each hour a room / is a form of sadness." These poems are fresh in their negotiations of the aesthetic realm; in it, beauty is not monument, and neither does the female body laze absently on the chaise. Instead, the hot energy of this language pulls us from everything we thought we know about beauty and the feminine, and casts us into journeying investigation in which nothing is reconciled. Selcer's are the kinds of poems we need to survive this century, to be encouraged to think and enact something new.

Dawn Lundy Martin
author of *Life in a Box is a Pretty Life* and *Discipline*

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